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Are There Any Good Reasons for Our Attachment to Religious Traditions?

Peter Jonkers

1. Changing paradigms in the interpretation of religious traditions

If one looks at the situation of religion in contemporary Western societies, it is clear that the well-known secularisation-theory has lost a great deal of its paradigmatic status and can no longer be considered as giving an adequate interpretation of the current developments in the religious field. According to this theory, religious traditions were bound to lose ground in modern societies because they were seen as strange entities in an inhospitable environment. As scientific reason had disenchanted the world, replacing supernatural explanations of the world by secular ones, and detaching many aspects of individual and social life from their religious embedding, the institutionalised religions would become a more and more marginal phenomenon, and were eventually doomed to disappear. Phrased positively, the only kind of religion that had a chance to survive in modernity would be an internally secularised religion, which had demythologized its ritual dimension and its magical practices, and had brought its doctrines, especially in the field of morals, in accordance with liberal society.[1]

However, the actual developments of religions prove to follow quite different paths. Against all odds, there is not only a growing general interest in all kinds of religious phenomena in many highly secularised societies, but many people seem to be especially intrigued by those religious manifestations that have withstood the wave of secularisation and rationalization during the second half of the 20th century: there are waiting-lists for people who want to spend some time in a monastery to share the life of the monks, hundreds of thousands take part in the World Youth Days, faith healing sessions are widely attended, new religious movements, especially evangelical and spiritual ones, are booming. In addition, in their search for new spiritual experiences, people do not limit themselves to the Christian tradition, but also look for enriching spiritual elements in other religions, such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, as well as in vaguely religious movements like New Age and esotericism. For example, individuals may build their own house altars with images of Jesus together with Buddha, as well as with a Jewish menorah, combining it with a New Age kind of striving after cosmic harmony and unification with others.

1 For a recent survey of the secularisation-paradigm and its problems see Hellemans 2007, 19ff.

From a philosophical perspective, the fundamental shortcomings of the secularisation-paradigm are an illustration of the more general thesis of the failure of the project of the Enlightenment, which aimed at replacing all traditions, including religious ones, by a cool, rational domination of the world. To quote Gianni Vattimo in this respect:

> Today there are no longer strong, plausible philosophical reasons to be atheist, or at any rate to dismiss religion. Atheistic rationalism had taken two forms in modernity: belief in the exclusive truth of the experimental natural sciences, and faith in history's progress towards the full emancipation of humanity from any transcendent authority. (...) Today, however, both belief in objective truth and faith in the progress of Reason towards full transparency appear to have been defeated. (Vattimo 1999, 28ff.)

With this remark, Vattimo expresses his basic scepticism, not to say suspicion, with regard to the ideal of rational control and planning of nature and history, which has dominated modern culture since the Enlightenment. In this opinion he is not alone. In the eyes of many people the modern idea of the disenchantment of the world has been disenchanted itself. Science and technology have proven unable to solve the moral dilemmas concerning questions about life and death and have, instead, led to a dramatic increase of their complexity. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether science has brought any nearer the solution of the most important world-problems, such as the quality of our natural environment, war and peace, poverty, etc. Another aspect of the optimism of Enlightenment, viz. the trust that mankind would be able to guide the course of history in the right direction, has proven to be false as well. Both World Wars have made us face the fact that the course of history does not reveal a positive dialectic at all.[2]

The growing interest in all kinds of religious imageries and experiences asks for new explanatory concepts. Social scientists have put forward terms like *bricolage* and *consumerism* as new catchwords to map out the new religious landscape. First of all, these words highlight the basic conviction that religion and modernity are not to be seen as antagonistic realities. Rather, modernity brings about a transformation of religions so that it is much more accurate to speak of religious modernisation than of an opposition between the two (Hellemans 2007, 36ff.).

The term bricolage refers to the fact that the religious convictions and practices of many people are the result of tinkering, of fitting elements of various religions traditions into an individual religious patchwork, as the example given above illustrate. Whether or not this bricolage is successful does not depend on an objective standard, such as its conformity with a given (religious) tradition, but only on subjective preferences, on whether one feels good with them. Many people seem to follow what Peter Berger has called the "heretical imperative":

2 I developed this issue further in: Jonkers 2000.

people feel obliged to be heretics, to construe their own religion in accordance with their own nature and aspirations (Hellemans 2007, 177).

The other term to characterise the changing attitude towards religion is consumerism. This term is used to refer to the popular behaviour of contemporary people with regard to religion, who act in a similar way as consumers in a supermarket: in the offer of religious commodities they pick and choose what they expect will best meet their personal needs. The religious supermarket is only one market among many in the enormous shopping mall of modern culture, all of them trying to seduce the consumer into buying their lifestyle products from them. Therefore, many post-modern individuals are constantly busy constructing and reconstructing the content and meaning of their lives, gaining information about whether there is anything attractive in the latest new trends, desperately hoping to find recognition from others for their lifestyle, and always afraid of being out of vogue (De Dijn 2006, 29ff.).

As such, the phenomena of bricolage and comsumerism manifest the large-scale processes of individualisation and pluralisation, which may be seen as the most dominant characteristics of advanced or late modernity, that is, the period since the sixties of last century.[3] Hence, in order to understand the current religious reality, many social scientists focus on the religious and spiritual experiences of individuals rather than on the institutionalised church-communities, their traditional doctrines, and rituals. The latter remain important as suppliers of religious themes, images, rituals and doctrines, but, as a result of the "subjective turn" of the sixties, their meaning and function have changed dramatically. They have lost, to a large extent, their monopoly since other providers of ideas, theories, and rituals about the meaning of life have emerged, especially in the fields of art, leisure, therapy, etc. In response, many Churches have pluralized and individualised their "offer" as well, thus becoming more flexible. Given the fact that Churches are still by far the most important suppliers on the religious "market", they present their traditions, rituals, buildings, etc. as specific treasures, inheritance, reservoirs from which individuals can draw spiritual water. Thus, to a certain extent, Churches have gone along with this global tendency of pluralisation and individualisation by deconstructing to some degree their all-embracing traditions and adapting them to the preferences and shopping-habits of contemporary individuals. Consequently, Churches have become vulnerable, dispensable, servicing institutions. The monolithic religious institutions and traditions have lost ground as standards and landmarks of religiosity, and the ideals of authenticity and self-spirituality have taken their place (Hellemans 2007, 199).

Although the evolution towards a pluralized and individualised society is welcomed by most post-modern individuals, the declining impact of substantial traditions, religious and otherwise, upon their lives nevertheless confronts them

3 For an indication of the differences between modernity (the period between 1750/1800 and 1960) and advanced modernity (the period from the sixties of last century onward) see Hellemans 2007, 195ff.

with a feeling of being uprooted, of living in a fragmented and continuously changing world void of substance. This feeling becomes manifest in the fact that more and more people restlessly look for ever new meanings and experiences, thus revealing a sense of longing without belonging. It is no coincidence that these individuals often use keywords like *conversion* and *pilgrimage* to characterise their existence. But, in my view, this restlessness only shows that they are caught between their aversion to commit themselves to substantial traditions and their need of such commitments for the sake of giving substance to their lives. In sum, the ideal of authenticity, especially its most radical expressions, lays a burden upon contemporary individuals, the weight of which they can hardly bear.

A relatively new phase in the current process of pluralisation concerns the consequences of the impact of the influx of non-Western immigrants in most European countries. This gives rise to many new and unexpected questions regarding the mutual relationship between religious traditions and contemporary society, which have not yet really been examined by the social sciences and philosophy. This development puts the typically Western liberal idea of how to deal with (religious) values and practices seriously under pressure. Although it is clear that the *bricoleurs* and the consumerists still dominate the religious scene in Europe and other Western countries, their way of handling religious "commodities" is put into question by more traditional religious and non-religious ways of life, or convictions and practices. For example, our (Western, modern) idea of the role of women in public life meets with opposition by more traditional communities who see the care for the house and the family as the primary role of women. The recent changes in legislation of many Western countries that allows gay people to get married and to adopt children is considered by many as undermining the very substance of marriage and the family. The way in which we in the West treat elderly people, who gave birth to us and from whose past efforts we still abundantly benefit, is nothing less than appalling to many traditional, mostly non-Western communities. Although these differences in values, do's and don'ts, practices, etc. have always existed, the new phase in the process of cultural pluralisation in Western societies has exacerbated their effects considerably, leading to all kinds of controversies. The crucial question is: How can people with quite diverging religious and non-religious ways of life live together peacefully and with respect for each other's substantial convictions and practices?

Until recently, the predominant answer to the effects of this new phase of the pluralisation of ways of life in the Western world was *multiculturalism*. According to its explicit credo, diverging ways of life, including more traditional and non-secularist ones, not only have to be tolerated but even welcomed as an enrichment of our culture. But, at the same time, multiculturalism implicitly states that in order to be fully accepted in contemporary society, all expressions of these ways of life have to remain strictly confined to the private sphere because, if not, they would jeopardise the predominance of modern society's secular character. However, the assumption that a complete split between the private and the public would be possible, and that people, belonging to different (religious) traditions would not at all interfere with each other in the *agora* proved to be an illusion. The substantial attachment people have to their own traditions simply cannot be limited to the private sphere, as the recent controversies about the acceptability of wearing religious symbols in public has made clear. Therefore, multiculturalism can no longer be promoted as the universal remedy for the social controversies resulting from the pluralisation of ways of life. Its shortcomings show that even an individualised, pluralistic society cannot postpone answering the question about the social acceptability and value of these existential commitments indefinitely.[4]

It is against this complex background that I will try to answer the question of whether there are good reasons for our attachment to religious traditions, which is a philosophical question underlying most of the problems mentioned above. In order to do so, I will first define what religious traditions are and how we are attached to them. Then I will examine some current explanations and justifications of our attachment to these traditions and point out their shortcomings. Finally, I will examine whether the concept of "existential truth" is a viable way to give a reasonable justification of this attachment.

2. Religious traditions as substantial ways of life[5]

Generally speaking, traditions can be defined as ways of life, of experiencing, acting and thinking, which are shared by a smaller or larger human community. Traditions have been handed down through the ages from generation to generation, and are closely connected to a complex whole of symbolic meanings and distinctions, which implies that the life of a community can only be understood in the light of these symbolic meanings and distinctions. Basic meanings concern the origin and destiny of the world, the dignity of humans, the relations between people, whereas distinctions qualify these meanings, such as those between children and adults, male and female, pure and impure, good and bad, the living and the dead, God and the world, etc. In this context, symbolic means: not natural, culturally determined. That is not to say that the natural dimension would be insignificant for human life, but it is important to realise that the natural only gets a meaning through a symbolic, cultural order. On a purely natural level, these meanings and distinctions hardly make any sense at all; nevertheless, they are essential for our understanding of and acting in the world. For example, by burying their dead – one of the oldest and most widespread traditions – people give a symbolic meaning to a natural event. By doing so, a human community expresses that there is an essential, symbolic distinction between the

4 I developed this critique of theism further in Jonkers Forthcoming.

5 In this section I am largely dependent on Herman De Dijn's characterisation of religious traditions (De Dijn 2006, 14ff.).

human and the non-human, thus detaching human life from the order of nature, in which the symbolic cult of the ancestors does not make sense at all.

Secondly, although traditions are cultural "products", they are not in the control of human individuals. We do not control symbolic meanings and distinctions, but they dominate us by structuring our existence and giving meaning to it. In order to clarify this point, I want to make use of Odo Marquard's distinction between arbitrary-contingency and fate-contingency (Marquard 2003a, 157). Arbitrary-contingency can be described as something that could have been otherwise, and can be changed by us at will. This type of contingency puts humans in command to determine all the contingencies of their lives, both trivial and vital ones. Ever since the emergence of the Enlightened project to liberate human beings from all external elements, especially (religious) traditions that hinder autonomous self-fulfilment, our conception of contingency has been dominated by arbitrary-contingency. In fact, this kind of contingency is a negation of what is available. It negates the knowledge that is valid because it was valid before and the rules for our actions that apply because they have applied before. Fate-contingency, on the other hand, is something that could have been otherwise, but cannot be changed by us: we can neither choose nor change the fact that we have been raised in a specific family and bear a specific name, that we have been made familiar with certain traditions, that one specific language is our native language, etc. These examples show the strength of all kinds of historical particulars, leading to the conclusion that fate-contingency always prevails in determining our lives. In other words, the choice which we are is embedded in the non-choice which we also are, in the traditions enabling us to choose at all. Future needs history; choice needs traditions. We humans are always much more determined by our traditions than through our choices (Marquard 2003a, 154). From this perspective, the self-important presumptuousness with which we make our plans or take decisions often makes us look ridiculous. In sum, although it remains to be seen whether traditions are purely contingent,[6] it is clear that they determine us far more than we determine them.

Thirdly, our attachments to traditions are primarily of a practical nature. They help us to orientate ourselves in life and in our relations to each other by organising and structuring all aspects of human life on the basis of symbolic distinctions between what is good and valuable in life and what is not. Although some traditions, especially religious ones, include sophisticated systems of knowledge about the theoretical background of these meanings and distinctions, their core business is to mark and interpret the crucial moments of life by relating them to authoritative stories and ritual practices with which people are familiar.

Fourthly, symbolic meanings and distinctions are embedded in all kinds of material things, such as specific places, events, bodies, and objects. Through these materialisations they concretise their connection to a way of life. Thus,

6 I will come back to this point in the next sections of this contribution.

nations commemorate the symbolic meaning of special dates, which are constitutive for their identity, by materialising them through a national holiday, thereby distinguishing these days from ordinary working days; statues are erected to materialise the symbolic meaning of certain persons or events; certain people wear special vestments when exercising their office, which is, again, a materialisation of a symbolic distinction between them and the people not exercising that office. Although these objects and dates may be insignificant for an outsider, they are nevertheless of crucial importance for the people belonging to this tradition because they are the only things available to express symbolic meanings and distinctions. There is a subtle but simultaneously essential distinction between ordinary material things and materialisations of symbolic meanings. For example, although vandalism as such is generally treated as a criminal offence, people desecrating tombs are liable to a much more severe punishment and are viewed as causing a much deeper harm. Similarly, burning their flag hurts the compatriots much more than burning an ordinary piece of cloth. Apparently, insignificant material objects can have strong symbolic meanings. The widespread feelings of being disrespected when these objects are violated show how crucial these materialisations are for the people attached to these traditions. This also shows that the material embedding of symbolic meanings is not something provisory, which is to be eventually superseded in a purely spiritual inwardness. Rather, this embedding belongs to the essence of what a tradition is.

Fifthly, the consequence of the fact that traditions are always embedded in communal ways of life is that they cannot be understood separately, objectively, from an outsider's perspective. A clear example of the clash between an insider's and an outsider's perspective is the debate about Islamic women wearing a veil. People interpreting this material expression of a symbolic distinction from an outsider's point of view, e.g. from a secularist, Western perspective, often see the veil as a sign of sexual oppression, which should be banned. Apart from the fact that this judgement betrays a rather patronising attitude, which is completely at odds with their self-proclaimed liberalism, it shows the difficulty for an outsider to understand the depth of what these symbolic meanings and distinctions mean for an insider. As secular Westerners we do not really grasp what it means for Islamic women to wear a veil, or why they are so attached to it. Moreover, the debate about the veil shows that what is at stake here is of a symbolic nature. If a veil were only a simple material thing, there would be no reason at all for secularists to make so much fuss about it. But it has a symbolic meaning for the secularists as well, albeit a different one, namely, it threatens certain liberal values and practices that are very precious to them.

Another consequence of the material embedding of their symbolic meanings is that traditions have a certain stability. Words and gestures, music and vestments are often handed down through the ages, without much change. This, again, illustrates the fact that we do not so much construe traditions, but that they construe us, in the sense that their substantial character enables us to situ-

ate ourselves in a cultural space and time. Especially in the case of a religious tradition, the care of this stability is often put in the hands of specific persons, who have been chosen to safeguard its symbolic meanings and rituals by giving an authoritative interpretation of them and by performing them.

Although religious and secular traditions have most of the above-mentioned characteristics in common, it belongs to the specificity of religious traditions that they relate a human way of life with a transcendent reality, that is, with the divine or with a God, thus adding extra dimensions and qualifications to the already existing ones, such as between the sacred and the profane. Although most religions have developed a sophisticated doctrine of faith, they, like secular traditions, are primarily ways of life, closely related to stories and practices, similar to the far less doctrinally developed secular traditions. In the next sections I will focus on Christianity as an example of a religious tradition. However, it is important to realise that Christianity shares many of its characteristics with secular traditions, as the examples given above have shown.

3. The problems of some current justifications of religious traditions

The characteristics of traditions, given in the previous section, run the risk of concealing one specific aspect, which has come to the fore since early modernity, namely, the fact that they *are seen as* traditions. Historically, this is a consequence of the Reformation, leading to a religious pluralism, which divided the Western world internally in a way it had never experienced before. In order to deal with this experience, and especially to avoid the tragedy of the religious wars (the notorious Thirty-Years' War, which caused the death of three to four million people), the Enlightenment came to the conviction that (religious) traditions are something contingent, bound to a specific time and place, and hence not worth quarrelling about, left alone to form a *casus belli*. This insight gradually enabled people to explicitly distinguish between various traditions, religious and secular ones, and to weigh them against each other. They could take a more detached, and thus more instrumental attitude towards these traditions, an evolution that still continues today, as shown in the first section of this paper. This development has produced a major paradigmatic shift in the understanding and justification of religion. Of course, understanding Christian faith with the help of reason is as old as Christianity itself. But characteristic of all this premodern understanding of faith was that it departed from an essentially internal, Christian perspective, as is shown by Anselm's famous phrase, *fides quaerens intellectum*. However, since modernity, completely new strategies of justifying Christian faith have become epistemologically possible. The traditional process of an *internal* clarification of the mystery of faith is, to some extent, replaced by offering justifications from an *external* perspective.[7] In this section I will illustrate the consequences of this major shift by discussing two diverging strategies

7 For a more detailed analysis of this development see Jonkers 1998.

of justification, namely, philosophical theism, the predominant way to justify religion during modernity, and the justification of religious traditions on the basis of their beneficial effects on mental health and happiness, which is quite popular in our post- or late- modern times. According to the former, objectivistic approach, religion has to meet the standards of the objective, detached ratio; following the latter, rather instrumental line of reasoning, religion is judged on its capacity to foster the ideals of authenticity and individual expressivity.

Theism can be defined as the philosophical doctrine of the existence of a personal being, who is the creator of the world, has a supreme intelligence and will, and is the source of all moral obligation. To some extent, this rationalistic approach mirrors the secularisation paradigm, which also aimed at confining religious traditions within the limits of what was acceptable to philosophical reason. One trend-setting example of this approach can be seen in Descartes's dedication of his philosophical opus magnum, the *Meditations on First Philosophy,* to the professors of the theological faculty of the Parisian university wherein he affirms that he has "always been of the opinion that the two questions respecting God and the Soul were the chief of those that ought to be determined by help of Philosophy rather than of Theology" (Descartes 1996, 1). This means that theism can be seen as a kind of philosophical "take-over" of Christian faith, thus giving a very specific interpretation of the traditional Christian idea of the connection between faith and reason, which, as such, has always been the key for the understanding of religion, both in pre-modern and in modern thinking.

Due to modernity's focus on foundational and epistemological questions, other traditional subjects of Christian thinking, such as revelation, the narratives of the Bible, sacraments, spirituality, the church, etc., became far less important. As a child of modernity, theism wanted to present itself as a strictly philosophical doctrine in order to have a common debating ground with secular reason and its products, scepticism and atheism. Consequently, it is no wonder that as modern culture came more and more under the spell of scientific reason, theism, reinforcing its "foundational" and epistemological character, became generally accepted as the most suitable instance to defend the truth of religion, not only in confrontation with secularist philosophy, but also with the natural sciences.

In spite of its reputation of intellectual rigour and philosophical seriousness, theism's justification of Christian faith has been severely criticised. Due to its specific, that is, rationalistic and foundational character, it lost something essential from sight. One can legitimately ask whether theism really has succeeded in justifying religion as a concrete way of life. Can the abstract, metaphysical concepts of theism really serve as a foundation for and minimal content of the living God of Christian religion? Isn't the committed, existential relation of the faithful towards God of a totally different nature than the neutral, theoretical relation of a philosopher towards the metaphysical absolute or of a scientist with regard to his theoretical assumptions? Moreover, one can doubt whether theism's specific interpretation of the relation between faith and reason is ade-

quate. Doesn't theism, in fact, supersede faith with reason? Finally, in the course of its development, theism itself became affected more and more by the scientific approach on which it was dependent. As science gradually became more dominated by mathematics, theism often took a similar formalistic approach, thus appearing eventually as a kind of higher mathematical science about God.

All these questions raise serious doubts about whether theism is a viable way for the justification of religion. Doesn't this kind of objectivistic, rationalistic defence in fact annihilate what it wants to safeguard, namely, religion as a concrete way of life? From the perspective of philosophy of culture, these problems facing theism are themselves a consequence of the growing unease with the project of enlightened reason as such, in particular its disenchanting effects upon our social environment, its contribution to the domination of instrumental reason to the detriment of other spheres of human existence, and, last but not least, its foundationalism. In this context, Marquard's ironic description of the unjust and irrational character of this seemingly rational demand to justify one's way of life, be it traditional or modern, religious or secular, deserves to be quoted:

> Nowadays, there is a general tendency to force everybody and everything to justify themselves. Everyone has to enter into a "context of justification" – its most luxurious shape is the so-called "dominant-free discourse" – and has to justify him- or herself, especially when one is stuck in a crisis of justification. And this seems everywhere to be the case nowadays – in an era that is readily called post-conventional. And if somewhere there might not be a crisis of justification yet, it is necessarily invented for the sake of the general propagation of the desire to justify oneself. Apparently, everything has to be justified nowadays: the family, the state, causality, the individual, chemistry, vegetables, hair growth, one's temper, life, culture, swimming trunks. In fact, there is only one thing that does not need to be justified: the exigency of a justification for everything and everyone. But why is this so? When I – in an attempt to be polite – introduce myself by saying: "Allow me to introduce myself: Marquard", then the normal answer seems to be: "Without justification nothing at all is allowed here! Justify yourself! What gives you the right to be Marquard, such as you are, and not someone completely else? And with what right are you at all, rather than not-being?" This climate of the need for justification is a phenomenon, that has to be recognised and named, and because it turns everything in a certain sense into a tribunal, I call it the tribunalisation of the modern social environment. (Marquard 2003b, 124)

This quotation illustrates the embarrassment many faithful feel when they are called to account for their faith: they are forced to justify themselves even before they have spoken a word or performed any action, and have to respect the

codes and rules, which were decreed without their consent. In spite of its self-created image of reasonableness, the modern discourse of justification has brought about its own mechanisms of irrational coercion. Apart from the fact that this foundational demand is unable to justify itself, one can ask whether it is reasonable to expect people to justify their lives before they have started to live. Although this demand sounds ridiculous, one only has to keep in mind the concrete example of parents who are expected to justify their decision to have their newly born child baptised, to show that it is all but imaginary. In sum, just as the rise of theism was the effect of the emergence of modern, scientific reason, its decline also reflects the problems that this specific form of rationality has run into.[8]

A completely different, more pragmatic way to justify religious traditions, which is quite popular in our time, is to see them as contributing to the well-being of people. This is an effect of the stress on authenticity and individual expressivity, which is the predominant perspective from which all kinds of values, practices, truths, etc. are evaluated. Just like theism can be interpreted as a philosophical manifestation of the secularisation paradigm, this instrumental approach towards religious traditions mirrors the current attitude of consumerism and *bricolage*. This type of justification runs as follows: According to recent psychological research religious people are better able to cope with the setbacks of life and with death; they also prove to be happier, more integrated in their social environment, etc. However, it is commonly known that religion can also have very negative effects on the mental health of people. Therefore, it is all the more important for individuals to select from the variety of religious traditions those "commodities" or life-style goods that serve their interests best. Hence, current *bricolage* does not so much manifest the curiosity of contemporary humans for the exotic as such, but rather their desperate search for an enrichment and expression of their individuality. Obviously, this approach is based on an idea of religious traditions as purely contingent realities, which can be restyled and re-structured at will. It tries to justify specific aspects of them on a pragmatic level, viz. by highlighting their beneficial effects upon human existence.

This strategy of justification has the advantage of focussing much more on religion as a way of life than the rationalistic approach of theism was able to. Nevertheless it is quite problematic as well. First of all, such a reversal of the relation between religion and mental health is a logical flaw. It is logically incorrect to reverse the statement that religious people often are happier into the conviction that, if one wants to be happy, one needs religion. More importantly, things do not work this way from an anthropological perspective. Treating religion as an instrument for the benefit of one's mental health deprives it of the necessary condition to have any beneficial effect upon humans at all. It is only because the faithful place their lives in the sign of the risen Christ that they are

8 I developed this critique of theism further in Jonkers, Religious Truth in a Globalizing World.

capable of having another idea about human well-being, which results in them better coping with the adversities of life. Christian religion teaches people not to be too concerned about their personal happiness, but to accept it as God's free gift when doing His will. Happiness is given "on top of"; it is not a return in the economical sense of the word. Therefore, happiness can only be hoped for and never counted on. The New Testament offers an excellent illustration of this difference between an instrumental and a substantial religious attitude: "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6: 31-33.) This quotation sheds a quite different light on the relation between a religious way of life and human well-being than the consumerist approach. It shows that only on the basis of a long-term, substantial commitment to a religious tradition, that is, on the basis of a deep faith in God's healing power made concrete through stories, prayers, rituals, and doctrines, can one hope that faith helps people to cope with their existential questions in an authentic way. Hence, if people use religion as a direct means for their salvation and consolation, they will not find what they are looking for. Salvation and consolation are only by-products of a substantial religious relationship, or, to put it in religious terms, salvation and consolation are God's grace (De Dijn 2006, 22).

This leads us, secondly, to the question about the consequences of this attitude for religious traditions themselves. First of all, it is important to note that for most people religious purity and homogeneity are rather high ideals than actual reality. Common religiosity is more often than not characterised by a certain degree of heterogeneity. Moreover, the Catholic Church in particular even accepts a wide variety of motivations and ways by which the faithful can experience or express their faith, as the differences in spirituality between the various religious orders and congregations clearly show. But the Church, being the custodian of its tradition of faith, has always set certain limits to this heterogeneity. Especially in our pluralistic time, with its extreme stress on the individual's autonomous self-creation, the problems resulting from combining too many diverging aspects of religious traditions become more and more manifest. Consumerism presupposes that religions can be treated as a derivative of the need for the well-being of the subject. *Bricolage* further enhances the subject-centred character of this attitude, as it treats religious traditions as contingent, de- and re-constructible sets of convictions, stories, rituals, etc. They only have a meaning insofar as they appeal to *me*, insofar as they can be integrated into *my* individual way of realizing myself. Thus, religious traditions threaten to degenerate into lifestyle-goods, for sale on the market and promoted by the media. Only those elements of religious traditions that the creative individual can fit into his or her lifestyle are welcomed. Consequently, religion is no longer a matter of true substantial meanings, values and practices, but is subordinated to the beneficial effects people expect from it. Religious traditions are only appreciated insofar as they serve as a gold mine for the religious *bricoleur*. Elements that do not fit into this scheme, like moral values that run counter to the generally accepted secular, liberal morals, religiously inspired prescripts in clothing, and other conspicuous religious symbols that make us feel a bit uneasy, are often treated with misunderstanding or contempt, and run the risk of being thrown onto the rubbish dump of history.

In sum, it is obvious that such a purely pragmatic approach does not at all offer an adequate justification of religious traditions. From a religious perspective, the instrumentalisation of religion, which is implied in this approach, is a form of sacrilege, since it puts finite humans and their all too human needs above God. From a philosophical perspective, the self-centeredness of consumerism is completely at odds with the de-centring or dispossession of the "self" for the sake of God, which is the essence of an authentic religious way of life. Religion is not about the realisation of our individual, self-centred will, but preaches that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Moreover, the current practice of *bricolage* threatens to deprive religious traditions of yet another essential characteristic, viz. that they are all-encompassing symbolic systems, that they pervade every aspect of human life and even the whole of reality with symbolic meanings, and that all these meanings are closely interrelated and hierarchically structured. They cannot be deconstructed and reconstructed without losing their substance. Although it is quite understandable that most religious people feel attracted more to certain elements of their tradition than to others, and that they can be genuinely impressed by the spiritual richness of other traditions, any attempt to justify our attachment to a religious tradition runs into problems if the heterogeneity within one tradition and the differences between various traditions become too great. For example, it requires too much mental acrobatics if one wants to follow the burial-ritual in the Christian tradition, for which the hope for the resurrection of the body at the end of time is essential, while simultaneously believing in reincarnation, which presupposes a cyclical world-view. Even a post-modern philosopher like Rorty warns against the consequences of this practice of infinite *bricolage*. It is the characteristic of what he calls post-modern ironists, or people who are continually re-describing themselves, society, and the world in ever-new ways by constantly re-creating themselves. However, according to Rorty, the ironist is a pathological figure, since he is constantly in doubt as to whether he hasn't been raised in the "wrong" language-game, and inclined to give up one tradition in favour of another (Rorty 1991, 203).[9] Because they all are equally contingent in his view, it does not make sense to discuss them on a rational level, let alone try to justify them.

All this shows that the attempt to justify religious traditions by considering them from a purely pragmatic perspective, that is, as instruments for human well-being is doomed to fail. Just as was the case with theism, this pragmatic

9 Instead of traditions, Rorty speaks of "final vocabularies". See: Rorty 1989, 73ff.)

approach threatens to annihilate what it wants to safeguard, namely, the substantial attachment of humans to religious traditions.

4. Religious traditions as incarnations of existential truth

So far, the prospects of finding good reasons for our attachment to religious traditions have not been very hopeful. As I showed in the previous section, the two most popular strategies of justification cause insurmountable problems. Therefore, some philosophers embrace traditionalism as the only remaining viable answer to understand our attachments to religious traditions. Essentially, traditionalism stresses the psychological and societal grounds for our attachment to (religious) traditions, thus showing a curious mixture of accepting their contingency and our substantial commitment to them. Traditionalism's answer to the question of whether there are good reasons for our attachment to traditions runs as follows: confronted with the enormous variety of traditions, religious and otherwise, people have become aware of the sheer contingency of traditions, while at the same time experiencing their substantial commitment to a very small number of them. In fact, both Rorty and Marquard urge us to adopt such a traditionalist attitude. For Rorty, the ironist can only avoid becoming a pathological figure if he devotes himself to the tradition he is familiar with: he simply declares that there are limits to what one can take seriously (Rorty 1991, 187ff.). Marquard's interpretation of traditions as models of fate-contingency expresses the same idea: although they are completely contingent, life is impossible without them, so it is best to acknowledge this "fact of life" and to stick to these traditions.

Although traditionalism may look quite attractive to many Christians who have become weary of the stress of constantly having to justify their religious convictions in a secular age, ultimately it is not a real option. Traditionalism entitles us to stick to our religious tradition on psychological or societal grounds, but refuses any reasonable discussion about it, because it makes no sense to argue about something completely contingent. However, although both (religious) traditions themselves and our attachment to them contain many contingent elements, mainly resulting from historic particulars, education and socialisation, it is highly problematic to interpret them as nothing but contingent symbolic realities. From a religious perspective it is vital to recognise that being a Christian is also and even primarily the result of a personal conversion, which rests on the basic conviction that Christ is our Saviour, since "He is the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). This implies a promise of salvation that not only counts for me, but is true for all people. Through a variety of concrete experiences, behaviours and ways of thinking, the faithful bear testimony to this fundamental truth of their faith. An outstanding example of this are the martyrs. According to the original meaning of this (Greek) word, martyrs are people who publicly testify to the truth of their faith at the cost of their lives, if necessary

presuppose that people experience their religious way of life as a truthful one, and thus different from their substantial attachment to all kinds of contingent convictions and practices. One can compare this with (the attachment to) secular traditions, such as democratic decision-making procedures, social security, individual freedom, non-violent practices in settling the conflicts between states, etc. Again, although both the origins and the content of these traditions and our commitment to them contain many contingent aspects, their meaning goes well beyond the contingent fact that they were first theoretically developed and put into practice in the Western world.[10] Moreover, the need of giving good reasons for our attachment to (religious) traditions has taken on an acute urgency due to the increase in cultural plurality in our societies, causing heated debates and sometimes even leading to violence. On the basis of the observations in the preceding sections, I will try to formulate an alternative to the traditionalist answer.

My proposal to look for good reasons for our attachment to religious traditions implies taking leave from the paradigm of the Enlightenment. As explained above, the Enlightenment abstracted from religious traditions as concrete, particular ways of life, and was only prepared to accept those religious truth-claims that could be justified objectively, almost scientifically, thus disqualifying all the rest of a religious tradition as contingent and irrational. However, since all the great (religious) traditions see themselves as expressions of encompassing symbolic meanings and distinctions, they refuse to be split up into a rational core and a wide variety of purely contingent representations. To the contrary, they claim to show humans their *true* origin and destiny, which cannot be detached from its concretisation through a variety of ideas, (ritual) practices and moral prescripts. Since this truth concerns human existence as a whole, it cannot be discovered and examined from a purely neutral, outsider's perspective. It can only be found primarily on a committed, existential level, that is, from an insider's point of view. To give only one example of this difference, the truth of the faith in God as the meaning (in the sense of origin and end) of human existence cannot be reduced to an objective, scientific theory about the big bang. Phrased positively, I make a plea to answer the question of whether there are good reasons for our attachment to religious traditions in a similar way as the pre-modern paradigm of faith in search of understanding attempted: people try to understand the truth of a faith to which they are existentially committed. Unlike the Enlightenment generally assumed, this commitment is not an irrational prejudice, from which people have to be liberated in order to know the truth at all, but a basic attitude towards life that enables them to express a truth that gives meaning to their lives.

However, this critique of the abstract outsider's approach of the Enlightenment should not make us blind to the fact that it is neither an option to continue the pre-modern way of faithful thinking unreservedly. Modernity's explicit rec-

ognition of (religious) pluralism has caused a shift, which has to be taken into account in every contemporary discussion about religious issues. Hence, the attempt to give reasons for our attachment to religious traditions cannot confine itself to a clarification of one's own faith from an insider's perspective, that is, by and for the members of one's own community of faith. In some way or another one has to enter into discussion with those people not belonging to that community. This discussion is all the more urgent since the critique of the paradigm of multiculturalism has shown that it is impossible to confine (religious) traditions to the private sphere, and to separate them from practices either in the private or the public sphere. When discussing which (religious) practices are socially acceptable, it does not suffice to refer only to the rights of existing traditions and cultural particularities, however important they are. Hence, justifying one's faith implies that one has to elucidate the existential truth, of which one is convinced from an insider's perspective and to which one is existentially committed, for people not sharing this perspective and commitment, in other words, for the public opinion at large.

What is at stake here philosophically is the problem of the relation between hermeneutics, which takes an insider's perspective, and metaphysics, which examines whether the existential truth claimed by a (religious) community also has a more general meaning. However important a hermeneutics of (religious) ways of life is, it turns into a dead-ended relativism if it fails to show that they somehow refer to specific, but simultaneously essential, convictions about humans and society, which can be discussed by human reason.

In order to make my point clear, I will analyse whether the reasons for our attachment to a specific element of the Christian religious tradition, the celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays, can be explained to non-Christians.

> In the year 304 in North Africa, a number of Christians were arrested for gathering together to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday. When the proconsul asked Emeritus, the owner of the house, why he had allowed these people into his house, he replied that these people were his brothers and sisters. When the proconsul still insisted that he should have forbidden them entry, Emeritus replied that he could not: "*Quoniam sine dominico non possumus.*" The former Cardinal Ratzinger translated this as: "Without the day of the Lord, we cannot live." He commented, "For them it was not a question of a choice between *one* precept and *another,* but rather of a choice between all that gave meaning and consistency to life and a life devoid of meaning." So keeping the Lord's Day should shed some light upon what difference our faith makes to our lives as Christians (Radcliffe 2005, 194).

This example illustrates what testifying to the truth of one's attachment to a religious tradition actually means. First of all, it shows that religion is not so much about doctrines, but primarily concerns concrete practices, expressing a

way of life, such as the celebration of the Eucharist on Sunday in a community of faithful. Secondly, the saying "*Quoniam sine domenico non possumus*" clearly shows that an *in se* ordinary event, having a meal together, on a contingent day of the week, Sunday, gets a symbolic meaning for the people involved. It is no option for them to celebrate the Eucharist on another day of the week or in private, since Sunday symbolises the day of the resurrection of Christ, and the communal meal symbolises the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. This shows, thirdly, that it is impossible to separate one's group-identity from one's personal identity, implying that a strict separation between the private and the public sphere does not work. It is crucial that one's attachment to a tradition can be shared with others and that it is publicly recognised. Fourthly, apparently contingent, practical things, such as celebrating the Eucharist with others on a specific day of the week, determine one's identity much more than one would expect when departing from an idea of humans as autonomous, spiritual beings. The example makes clear that being deprived of this practice dispossesses Emeritus and his fellow believers from their Christian identity. Again, this proves that we not only give meaning to the world in which we live, but also, that external things have major repercussions on our selves.

From this perspective, the opposition of many faithful to the tendency in some European countries to liberalise legislation regarding "Sunday's rest" should not be seen as an irrational refusal to adapt themselves to cultural change, but as a form of testifying to the existential truth of this aspect of their religious tradition. As the above-mentioned example illustrates, Christian tradition offers numerous reasons why Sunday's rest has to be respected. However, all these reasons only count for people already belonging to this tradition; they stem from an insider's perspective, which inevitably differs from the perspective of the secular majority of Europeans. The crucial question in this context is whether it is also possible to describe this truth in such a way that it also becomes insightful for people not belonging to this tradition.

In an industrial society with a strong work ethic the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath and to do no work, is aimed at the idolatry of work. Just as idols are the work of human hands so this work may always become an idol, a means of alienation. The Sabbath is meant to stop people from being absorbed in the success story, to prevent people from being enslaved to productivity and profit. In a world in which people find the meaning of their lives in their work, what one does when one is not working is not so important. One does not work so as to be able eventually to relax. One has leisure so that one will be able to go back to work again. And what one does in one's free time, one's Sabbath, is not so important so long as one is back at work, refreshed, on Monday morning (Radcliffe 2005, 194).[11] All these reasons are not only insightful for the members of a religious community, but also for outsiders. These reasons are aimed at making people sensible to the fact that contingent, material practices, such as

11 Radcliffe quotes here a book by H. McCabe.

Sunday's rest, may incarnate symbolic meanings. Moreover, they show that the existential truth of Sunday's rest does not only apply to Christians, but may also count for non-Christians, though for different reasons.

This example also shows how one can be faithful to the existential truth of a tradition in changing circumstances. One cannot remain blind to the fact that the meaning of the Lord's Day has changed in most European countries over the last decades. This has to do with the fact that in contemporary society, which is often characterised as liquid modernity, work is acquiring a new meaning. The Lord's Day can no longer offer the secure axis around which to wrap and fix self-definitions, identities and life-projects. Neither can it be easily conceived of as the ethical foundation of society, or as the ethical axis of individual life. This means that abstention from work and the celebration of the Sabbath may also have a new meaning (Radcliffe 2005, 196). Just as in an industrial society the abstention from work on the Sabbath puts a stop to the idolatry of work and places it in the right perspective, in our contemporary liquid and insecure society the celebration of what is most enduring, the marriage in Christ of God and humanity, serves as counterpart of today's liquid society. The obligation to participate in the Sunday Mass embodies our faith in this enduring relationship. We might see it as a sign of our stable belonging in this liquid and mobile world. It is not an external obligation, but an expression of who one is. Obligations express the ways in which we are rooted in abiding relationships with other people. They are signs of those enduring fidelities that give us strength and identity. "My life may be pointed in all sorts of directions, loved by different passions and interests, but the Sunday Eucharist brings to light the one recurrent orientation of my existence, my homecoming to God. The Sabbath recalls one to the point of everything, which is the point of being a Christian." (Radcliffe 2005, 201) Again, these reasons for maintaining Sunday's rest not only apply to Christians, but also to non-religious people. They elucidate the existential truth of enduring relationships, which are not profitable in the economic sense of the word, but are nevertheless vital for society.[12]

Conclusion

Are there good reasons for our attachment to religious traditions? In my view, the previous section has made clear that there are, and moreover, that these reasons are not only insightful to the insiders, who are already committed to a specific religious tradition, but also to others, outsiders. In order to realise such a non-foundational, philosophical justification of religious traditions, a kind of mediation between an insider's and an outsider's perspective is crucial. For that reason I introduced the notion of existential truth. This approach starts from a hermeneutical perspective in the sense that it takes the testimonies of the faithful of their attachment to (elements of) their religious tradition as its point of

12 I developed this point further in Jonkers, P. Orthopraxis and remaining faithful to one's tradition (to appear).

departure and examines the symbolic meanings and distinctions implied in them. But in order to see if these immanent meanings can be made insightful for people not belonging to this specific religious tradition, this approach has to make the transition from hermeneutics to metaphysics. In other words, it has to transcend from a contextual analysis of religious meanings and distinctions to their existential truth, that is, their meaning for human life and society as such.

From the perspective of contemporary philosophy, which usually takes a very critical attitude towards any kind of metaphysical thinking, this step is a hazardous one. However, the kind of metaphysics I have in mind here is much more modest than modern, foundational, theistic metaphysics. It does not abstract from all particularity, thus producing only an abstract essence, but looks for the essential *in* the particular. In other words, this approach rests on the presupposition that it is possible to see in the particularity and contingency of religious traditions something universal and essential. Given the fact that I have taken an existential perspective as its point of departure, there is no possibility of proving this presupposition on a neutral, external level. This is simply an inevitable consequence of the non-foundational character of any existential approach. We just do not have an *a priori*, objective standard at our disposal, with which the substantial truth of a (religious) way of life could be determined unambiguously. We can only solve this problem *a posteriori*, by bringing this method into practice, and spending all our expertise on philosophically explaining the essence of a (religious) way of life, thus making it as strong and convincing as possible.

This approach is similar to the one of the apostle Paul at the Areopagus. Just as Paul had to explain the truth of the Christian way of life to epicurean and stoic philosophers, who did not at all share his basic convictions, the task of contemporary philosophers of religion is also to explain what is substantially true in the religious way of life they are familiar with, as reasonably as possible, so that it is intelligible to people who are not familiar with it.

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The Dialectics of Tolerance or *le Sauvage* as Neighbour

Theo de Wit

In an essay from 1997 the German Philosopher Rüdiger Bubner wrote about the "Dialectics of tolerance" (Bubner 1999). With this expression (*Dialektik der Toleranz*) Bubner was thinking of the following remarkable development or even reversal *(Umschlag)* in the conceptualization of modern tolerance in the nineties. While tolerance from the beginnings in the Edict of Nantes (1598) referred to the respect for the freedom of conscience for heterodox confessions and the – always difficult – enduring of deviating (religious) behaviour, today, Bubner observed, tolerance is promoted as a basic norm (*Grundnorm*), as pacifying construction material (*Baustoff*) for States and even for the world-society. Tolerance developed, in other words, from a marginal category to a political key-category.

In this contribution I shall – partly following on Bubner – first sketch the birth of modern tolerance (1) and this remarkable development, the upgrading of tolerance, which has taken place not only in the United States and Germany (Bubners examples), but in the Netherlands as well, perhaps even especially there. (2) Today, however – so is my thesis – we experience, partly as a reaction against this upgrading of tolerance, a surprising and disturbing new turn in the concept of tolerance: tolerance is becoming a polemical category and the former discourse of toleration as a pacifying attitude transforms in a discourse that marks sharp demarcation lines and even legitimizes repression and aggression in the name of tolerance. Some of our politicians and intellectuals are openly promoting *intolerance* as a task of civilisation and to achieve a future culture of ... tolerance. This raises the question about the mechanism that governs this strange dialectics, and how tolerance can be saved. (3)

1. The birth of modern tolerance

The modern concept of tolerance is the result of the sectarian civil wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In 1598 (Edict of Nantes) the French King promised the freedom of conscience (*liberté de conscience*), so that the Protestant minority could stay in France (Cf. Wanegfflen 1998). All serious efforts – in theory or in practice – to take the sting out of the (imminent) civil war with a religious dimension follow the same fundamental pattern: the dissociation of the political role as a citizen and the personal belief or confession.

It is still fascinating to retrace the way in which the great political thinkers in this era managed to open up a small space of tolerance by employing subtle philosophical-juridical distinctions. Even though one should in this period ra-